

7 Washington Square North  
New York City, New York Co., New York

HABS No. 4-16 - B

In conjunction with #8 Washington Square North

HABS  
NY,  
31-NEYO,  
19-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4  
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer  
25 West 45th Street, New York City



HISTORY OF #7 WASHINGTON SQUARE  
NEW YORK

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In the spring of 1831 my grandfather, John Johnston, with a number of his downtown neighbors decided to build a row of houses for themselves on the north side of Washington Square, which was then so far uptown that it was, for all practical purposes, in the country. They agreed upon similar plans and all the houses in the present block between University Place and Fifth Avenue were contracted for at the same time. The land belonged to the corporation of the Sailors' Snug Harbor, but the dwellings were owned by the various gentlemen who erected them.

The original plan provided for lots of about 27 feet front and this is the width of the first five houses from University Place - that is, Nos. 1,2,3,4,5 and 6, but from No.7 to No.13 they are wider, these seven houses having been erected on nine lots. Mr. Johnston secured two of these 30 foot plots and, wishing to obtain a wider house for himself, retained  $32\frac{1}{2}$  feet for his own residence, No.7, building No.6 upon the remaining  $27\frac{1}{2}$  feet.

While the house was being built Mr. Johnston and his family "took a journey" to Europe. They traveled extensively and everywhere were buying articles or ordering them for their own house, with usually duplicates for his neighbors, Mr. McGregor and Mr. Alley. Very likely more of the houses on the Square also profited by Mr. Johnston's orders in their behalf.

In the fall of 1833 the Johnston family returned from abroad and moved into their new home "on the Square" in November, 1833.

Just a word about "The Square". Fifth Avenue began and ended there - an oblong square, as you might call it, reaching from University



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Place on the east to McDougall Street on the west. There was a fence all around it, wooden I think, and a wide hedge of bushes and plants was next to the fence. In the centre it was all green grass with many trees and criss-cross paths, a fountain in the middle. Between that and the hedge was a broad earthen pathway where the troops used to parade and the park was then called "Washington Parade Ground".

The exteriors of the houses were all alike excepting for trifling differences in the front doors, and the fittings within were in many ways similar. The mantels, for instance, were beautifully carved. They had been ordered by John Johnston in Leghorn, Italy, and were made of statuary marble. Duplicates of his own mantels and other things were ordered by him, especially for his neighbors, Mr. McGregor and Mr. Alley, and possibly for some of his other neighbors. All the doors on the first floors were of the handsomest mahogany with silver plated hardware and hinges. The same French gilt and bronze chandeliers, with candelabras to match, were also to be found in a number of the houses.

All the furniture which Duncan Phyfe had made for the Johnston's first house at 16 Greenwich Street, was ready for the new home on Washington Square, and Phyfe had made many new pieces to fit the larger house. It is rather amusing to find that Duncan Phyfe furnished all their mattresses and pillows as well as furniture.

My grandfather, John Johnston, lived at No. 7 until the time of his death in 1851. I, his first grandchild and born in his house, was then three months old. My grandmother survived him until 1879, when she died in her 97th year. It was during these later years, when Mrs. Richard Alsop, Mrs. Saul Alley, Mrs. John Johnston, Mrs. John McGregor, Jr.,



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Mrs. George Griswold and Mrs. John C. Green, all intimate friends who had lost their husbands, that this block became known as "Widows' Row".

At my grandmother's death in 1879 No.7 was left by will to my father, John Taylor Johnston, but on Christmas Day of that year he gave it to me, and since then my husband, Robert W. de Forest, and I, with all our children have lived here, with much joy and contentment.

As time passed several of the houses in "the Row" came into the market. No.1, No.2, No.5 and No.6, also No.8 Washington Square, We bought them all, partly to protect our light and air in the rear and partly so that we might sell these houses to friends whom we would like to have as neighbors. We later gave No.1 to our daughter, Frances de Forest Stewart, and sold Nos. 2, 5 and 6 to friends. No.8 we did not sell because we wished to prevent any second story addition being put on the rear of the house, which would have been disastrous for us.

The interiors of the houses were very much alike - a large parlor in front and an equally large drawing room in the rear, beyond that a deep piazza with steps leading down to the garden. The family dining room was the front basement room, a nice sunny room, but whenever my grandmother gave a formal "dinner-party" or a "coffee-drinking" it was always in the drawing room. She could seat twenty-four at her Duncan Phyfe dining table, which is still used by me. There was no Croton water in those earliest days. Each house had a rain water cistern under the grass plot in the garden and usually one, a smaller one, under the front grass plot, right next to the coal chute. After Croton was put



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in she had one faucet in her own dressing room. The kitchen was in the rear and a small laundry. The pleasantest room in the house was the Library, the second story front room (now my bedroom). Here Duncan Phyfe had erected tall book cases almost reaching the ceiling, with a secret desk in one of them.

In this spacious house there were few bedrooms, only two on the second floor and four on the third floor, but then trundle beds could still be pulled out from under the big four posters.

In the meantime, with a growing family the de Forests really needed more than two rooms on the first floor, especially as we now used the drawing room as a dining room. And there was still another reason. My father had died in March, 1893, and we had inherited many of his pictures and objects d'art. Therefore, it must be a large room with a skylight for our pictures, while lower wainscot bookshelves would hold our books.

In February, 1895, the new Library was opened. It seemed as if we would never need more rooms! But my husband and I were born collectors! For years we had been interested in Folk pottery, buying whenever we traveled abroad such decorated peasant ware as they made for their own use and such indeed as was sold on the ground in their native market places, or carried from place to place on the backs of donkeys. Such articles we had bought in Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium, India, Egypt, Tunis, Mexico and from our Indians in the Southwest, also many pieces had been brought back to us by sympathetic friends from South America and other distant countries. E.J. de F. finally decided to bring together all these treasures so she rented a small stable on the Mews



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where she assembled all her pottery, but much more room was needed!

All this time we realized that one reason for keeping No.8 in our own hands was because we might need to use for our own purposes some of the very large yard in the rear of the house. In 1903 we felt that the time for this enlarging of our own borders had arrived. No. 8 Washington Square was not rented that year so we were at perfect liberty to take possession of some 25 feet on the rear of that lot and on it we built, opening out of our Library, a "Studio" room on the first floor for pictures and Japanese carvings, and beneath it a Pottery Museum, with glass museum cases.

In January, 1904, R.W. and E.J. de Forest, with friends, went to Mexico in a private car and spent about six weeks there. They bought large quantities of folk pottery in the various Mexican market places. They also purchased a number of very beautiful specimens of the ancient Mexican Talavera ware, but not, of course, as Folk pottery. This latter collection was later given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Meanwhile the folk pottery was all installed in the new Museum we had built, and on April 19, 1905, we had a very interesting "Pottery Reception" there. To this were invited all our most artistic friends, especially those who had helped us in collecting.

The Pottery Collection became gradually a considerable care for me. I could not let anybody else clean the pieces or wash off the shelves except myself and it was very fatiguing work. I decided, therefore, to give it to the Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia where they had a fine place with plenty of light to show it. In September, 1931, I gave it all to them.

*Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.*